

VZCZCXRO3255

OO RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHMOS

DE RUEHLB #0846/01 0761541

ZNY CCCCC ZZH

O 171541Z MAR 06

FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2610

INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RHMFIS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000846

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WERNER/SINGH

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/17/2016

TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER LE SY IS

SUBJECT: MGLE01: WALID JUMBLATT ON THE NATIONAL DIALOGUE
AND LEBANON'S PRESIDENCY

Classified By: Christopher W. Murray, Charge d'Affaires. Reason: Section 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) On March 16 Druse leader Walid Jumblatt discussed with Charge the national dialogue, Jacques Chirac's report of a possible Arab initiative to secure Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's cooperation in removing President Lahoud, Sheba,a Farms, and Christian presidential candidates. Jumblatt, pleased with his Washington visit, advocated that Defense Minister Elias Murr travel to Washington, presumably in connection with strengthening the Lebanese Armed Forces as a prerequisite to disarming Hezbollah. Jumblatt was skeptical that a Siniora mission to Damascus on Sheba'a would achieve much. He also doubted that the committee to address Palestinian weapons outside the camps would result in a breakthrough. Jumblatt noted contrasting impressions, from Hikmat Shehabi and Abdelhalim Khaddam, about the staying power of the Syrian regime. He also sensed a disturbing pro-Syria tilt in Russian policy toward Syria-Lebanon. End Summary.

NATIONAL DIALOGUE

¶2. (C) Jumblatt had returned from the U.S., via Paris where he met with President Chirac (see para 5 below), on March 12. He rejoined sessions of the national dialogue on March 13 and 14, which took up relations with Syria, disarmament of Palestinians outside the camps, and Sheba,a Farms. He described all three subjects as remaining rather inconclusive, given that the substance will be reserved for future action. For example, on the issue of Palestinian arms, he reported that the study committee will be chaired by Future Movement leader Sa,ad Hariri and Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, who make an odd pair if the committee is to bring real results in the coming months. Jumblatt thought that Nasrallah would resist tangible action against Palestinian arms outside the camps, on the ground that this could be a precursor to disarmament of Hezbollah itself.

¶3. (C) Discussion on relations with Syria included possible travel by Prime Minister Siniora to Damascus, who has been mandated to address Sheba,a Farms. Jumblatt, implicitly supporting his own position that Sheba,a Farms is not Lebanese, doubted that the Syrians would ever provide a signed document attesting that Sheba,a is Lebanese. One reason for this is that arguments in favor of Sheba,a as Lebanese are based in part on the validity of the 1920 mandate-era boundary. This same boundary, according to

Jumblatt, compromises Syria's claim to land in the Golan that adjoins Lake Tiberias. Thus, any Syrian endorsement of the 1920 boundary in the Sheba'a context would weaken the Syrian position elsewhere in the Golan, a position that is of much greater importance to the Syrians who have always cited the boundary of June 4, 1967, as their standard for an eventual agreement with Israel. Jumblatt repeated that PM Siniora had been authorized to go to Damascus on the Sheba'a issue; Charge asked him why Siniora would want to make the trip if prospects for success were so modest. Jumblatt shrugged, hinting that this conundrum for the Lebanese was certainly not of his making. He noted that the national dialogue conversation had taken up the question of whether the border should be "defined" or demarcated," and said that the distinction between the two was not of any practical significance. Jumblatt concluded with a disparaging remark about former Surete Generale chief Jamil as-Sayyid's "fraudulent" map of Sheba'a area put forth in 2000.

Saad's leadership

¶4. (C) Charge asked whether Saad Hariri is effective in holding together the March 14 coalition. Jumblatt replied that overall, the March 14 group is hanging together, but there is a major problem in Saad's political inexperience. Six months, he said, is not enough time to learn what he needs to know. Jumblatt said that Saad has made it clear to many that if President Lahoud departs office, Saad himself wants to take over the Prime Ministership. This, Jumblatt said, makes no sense from anyone's standpoint. Saad would not be up to the job, and what is wrong with letting PM Siniora continue to serve? Jumblatt said that Saad's advisers are a big part of the problem. With the exception

BEIRUT 00000846 002 OF 003

of journalist Hani Hammoud, whom he described as barely adequate, all the others are disastrous.

Arab Initiative with Bashar al-Asad?

¶5. (C) Jumblatt reported that he had met with French President Chirac in Paris on March 12. Chirac had spoken to him about a possible Arab initiative, presumably led by the Saudis and Egyptians. The plan would involve several Arab leaders approaching Bashar al-Asad, with the request that he withdraw his support from Lebanese President Emile Lahoud and advise Lahoud to resign. Jumblatt said he knew nothing of this, but stressed his concern about the inevitable price that Bashar would demand in return. Jumblatt was thus hesitant to announce his favor for such an initiative, at least until he knows what Bashar will ask for. Jumblatt reported that Chirac then said to him, "if this is to go forward, make sure that you do not leave France and the U.S. out of any such a deal."

The Presidency

¶6. (C) Jumblatt said that the national dialogue would address the presidency when it reconvenes on March 22. For now, the problem, he said, is that the Christians are in disarray. Among the possible replacements for Lahoud, he said he liked Nassib Lahoud. Michel Aoun is "crazy." Jumblatt said the Aoun-Hizballah alliance is strictly tactical, to Hizballah's advantage, with no substantive rapport between the two parties. Central Bank Governor Riad Salame is a technocrat, and the Christians need a politician. Jumblatt said he was unimpressed with arguments of Salame's lawyers that the constitution need not be amended to enable the Central Bank Governor to accede to the presidency. Jumblatt was mildly dismissive of MP Boutros Harb, he mentioned MP Nayla Mouawad by name but did not offer substantive comments. He said the problem with Amin Gemayel is that, "you never know what he is trying to say."

Electoral Law,
Economic Reform

¶7. (C) Charge asked if the national dialogue would take up a new Lebanese electoral law. Jumblatt, who opposes proportional representation that present is most versions of a new law, said that the problem with the now-stalled electoral commission is that it is composed entirely of technocrats, and there are no politicians. A new law cannot be developed by such a group. When asked whether the dialogue would engage the government's newly revealed economic reform plan, Jumblatt answered tersely, "no, none of the dialogue participants except Siniora would be able to understand it."

Russian Thinking

¶8. (C) Jumblatt thought that a pro-Syria clique, including Primakov and Soltanov, had taken over Russian policy toward Lebanon. He recalled what he said was an unpleasant lunch he had with the Russian ambassador three weeks ago. Russian Ambassador Sergey Boukin had said in reference to the challenges of the UNIIC inquiry: "Forget about the Hariri assassination. After all, the Americans never found out who killed President Kennedy." And at another point, Boukin said, "you Lebanese have never been able to govern yourselves, so get real about it."

Situation in Syria

¶9. (C) While in the U.S., Jumblatt had spoken by phone with former Syrian military Chief of Staff Hikmat Shehabi, who was in Los Angeles visiting his son. Shehabi told him that the regime in Damascus was still in strong shape. Jumblatt contrasted Shehabi's view with former Syrian Vice President Khaddam's belief that the Asad regime was near collapse. Jumblatt implied that he had spoken recently with Khaddam; he also noted that Khaddam's personal residences in Syria had been entirely looted. Charge noted Khaddam's recent lower profile. Jumblatt replied that the Saudis had asked the French to tell Khaddam to lower his profile, which Khaddam seems to have done, for example, in not giving any high profile interviews.

BEIRUT 00000846 003 OF 003

Military Assistance

¶10. (C) Jumblatt, during his meetings in Washington, had learned that Defense Minister Michel al-Murr had been invited to meet with U.S. officials. At two points in the conversations, he strongly encouraged U.S. officials to receive Murr, presumably to discuss U.S. military assistance to Lebanon. He said he had heard that Qatar is offering the Lebanese Internal Security Forces 100 new Russian-build trucks.

Hizballah

¶11. (C) Jumblatt said that Hizballah may have been getting listening devices from Iran, and asked if we knew anything about this. Charge said we had no information on this. Charge also asked in what form Hizballah gets its money from the Iranians, a popular subject of local speculation. Jumblatt answered that it all comes in by cash.

MURRAY